

April 17, 2018

Message from DCFS Director
Regarding Public Release of Data

Over the last few months, DCFS has been working on the development and rollout of an expanded monthly report to replace what many have known as the Executive Statistical Report, a report that has been historically used as a single public facing source of “truth” on critical child welfare indicators about Illinois. After we began to experience technical difficulties with the decades-old process that generated this report, it soon became clear that perhaps we could do better – that is, produce a report that was updated and more reflective of current policies, practices, one that is easier to read and digest and that is not reliant on worn-out technology.

For years, data reporting at the Department of Children and Family Services has been severely hampered by woefully out-of-date technology. We have decades-old data systems (some on main frame technology) and well over one hundred databases, each holding a fragment of data about one aspect or another of our work. To report in meaningful detail on any aspect of our system requires us to draw on these multiple sources.

One of those sources is the never-completed Statewide Child Welfare Information System, known as SACWIS, which was supposed to hold all of our data on children and families. Instead it is a 20-year-old half-finished product that buries much of the critical information in cumbersome large text blocks instead of more flexible and open data fields.

As a new director, I simply cannot imagine how we have managed to do business all these years without a reliable and timely scoreboard.

Producing the old report required extracting information from SACWIS, porting it to another one of our systems, then requiring multiple manual steps for assembly. While some may suspect that we are hiding data and information, instead we were struggling to untangle and re-build a way to produce a better report.

Not only do we believe that the public deserves accurate and timely information, we at DCFS need that as well.

Therefore, we have been working on new scorecards, for the public as well as for our own use. It seemed pointless to undertake a time-consuming debugging and repair of the ancient system we had. We are recreating the reports in a new process and will roll those out in phases as work on each one is completed.

The fact is that DCFS desperately needs a new data and information system. For about a year, we have been engaged in a feasibility study for replacing the old SACWIS system and the multiple databases we now rely on with a modern technology platform, that includes reliance on new more flexible technologies, more efficient data entry, and the capability to conduct comprehensive data analysis. We hope to be ready to go out for bids later this year.

As we roll out these new reports, it is critical to evaluate their use and value carefully. Given changes we have made in business processes and reporting internally, some of the information will look different and for good reasons – it will reflect current realities and it will therefore be more comprehensive in how it measures and reports on key information. One such data point is what appears, to some, as a large recent increase in “Subsequent Oral Reports,” which simply means a second hotline call about a family. Contrary to recent tweets and other reports, there has been no “chilling” increase in children “being re-abused even after DCFS steps in.”

Here is what is true about the so-called re-abuse statistics.

The stated increase in subsequent reports in the current year was mostly a result of a change in how we number cases about a family. The numbers are higher because we started counting them so we can have a real-time running total of how many investigative contacts we have had with a family. Our previous way of tracking cases and previous counts in the monthly data report ignored prior reports if they were unfounded (meaning investigators did not find enough evidence to substantiate abuse or neglect).

Last August, in response to cases such as Semaj Crosby in Joliet, we changed our tracking system, because we want investigators to know when families have had prior investigations. They need a quick and accurate understanding of these prior contacts – operating as a set of red flags – an opportunity for them to better gauge the potential risks they may see as they proceed in the current investigation. Just knowing the number of both indicated and unfounded prior investigations – when you have only 24 hours to get out and see a family – can mean a lot.

The new reports and ultimately a new system will mean a lot to DCFS and the work our frontline workers do. They must make difficult decisions that might either rescue a child or unnecessarily shatter their families. I encourage us all to step back and carefully weigh what we know, when we need to know it and to make sure we understand what we are measuring and what it really means to the protection and wellbeing of children and families.

Simply put, when we were forced to make changes to generate the new Executive Summary report, we were not able to go back to recount past cases, so the new number jumped higher. The bottom line is that we now know far more than we ever did before.

That improved line of sight on children is critical because DCFS receives about 5,000 hotline calls every week. About 1,700 of those turn into an investigation, and about half of those investigations are found to be substantiated abuse or neglect.

In many ways, DCFS is like an emergency room. We do not control what comes in the door, only what we do with those cases. The better we can see, the better we can respond. Child welfare is a complex business. Better data will help with our responses to families and give all of us a clearer vision of the challenges they face. Improving these reports and the technologies that support them is mission critical.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B.J. Walker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

B.J. Walker